ONE SHILLING

Life Among the Pygmies

OF THE ITURI FOREST, CONGO FREE STATE

BY

JAMES J. HARRISON

With 17 Illustrations

London:
HUTCHINSON & CO.
Paternoster Row
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Six of the Pygmies who have come to England.

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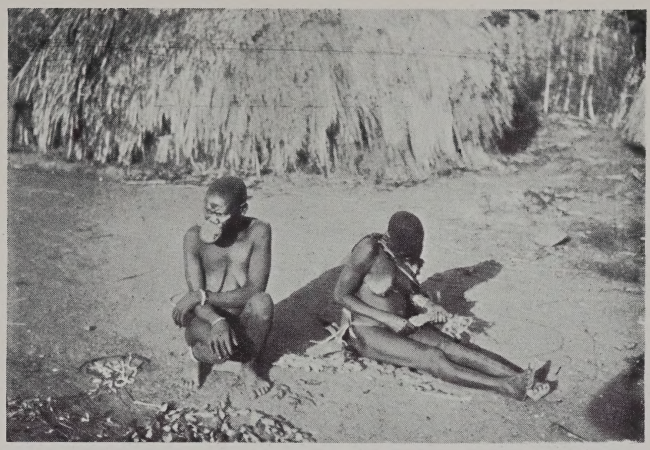

Walendi women with large circle of wood inserted in a cut of the lip.

THE PYGMIES.

BEFORE writing about my little pygmy friends, I should first of all like to mention a few facts about the Congo Free State. This enormous country, reaching from the Nile to the West Coast, may practically be called one huge forest. Fortunately for its opening up, Nature has provided it with the most splendid service of water-ways in the world. Twisting and twining, the mighty Congo river runs like a snake through its centre, gathering into its bed from north and south many other large rivers like the Kasai, Ubangi, and Aruwimi (the latter of which joined by the Ituri, traverses the whole of the Stanley Forest), with their sources rising close to the Nile.

Last year I had a most interesting hunting trip from Lado to Boma, merely touching the northern edge of Stanley Forest; I then made my way on to try for that rare animal the okapi, in the big forest near Enguetra. The rainy season drove me out before getting a shot, though I did manage to see one okapi. It was some pygmy photographs taken on this trip which caused so many friends at home to ask why I could not bring some of these pygmies to England, and I was thus first led to think of doing so. Having determined on another attempt to get the okapi, I also asked permission when in Brussels to take home some of the pygmies, and was most kindly granted it, on giving every assurance of their being volunteers, well treated, and returned again to their

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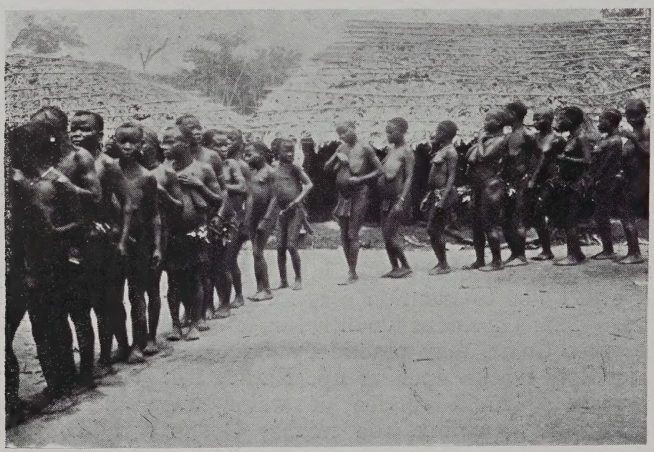
homes. January 29th found me at Lado, where I had arranged to meet a young Scotch engineer, by name Mr. Browne, whom I had met out there the previous year, and to whose assistance I was much indebted, through his being able to talk the different languages. My only other attendant was a Khartoum native called Wahby Ahmed, who turned out a perfect treasure. We took with us eight donkeys and a mule, though the latter unfortunately got away in the bush, and was, we afterwards heard, killed and eaten by the natives. With over 1,000 miles to trek and only eight weeks before the rains were due, I quite appreciated the hard task before us. However, by marching from 25 to 30 miles a day, and meeting with extraordinary kindness from our Belgian hosts, who never



Pygmies dancing.

delayed us an hour for porters, we achieved our object, and had our three weeks' hunting.

As the English papers have been filled with stories of all the natives fleeing from Belgian rule to settle in Uganda, I must just state the truth of how matters stand to-day on the Nile between Lado and Mahagi. Just beyond Kadge-Kadge I met a Chief called Tokwe, very busy building kraals, who told me that all his tribe were coming over to live on the Belgian side. Between Dufile and Wadelai I met and conversed with many chiefs, all occupied in a similar manner, their one remark being that having tried both Governments they preferred the Belgian. Two other powerful chiefs, Abala and Elo, crossed over to Belgian territory in July last, and have already built splendid villages. Further on a number of Kaie's men have come over independently, while nearer Wadelai you pass village

Pygmy group with two Walesse women.

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after village, all newly built. Beyond Wadelai a census in 1904 gave the number of people with the Chiefs Augola-Laia and Okelu of the Luru tribe at 417—in March, 1905, the return was 1,500. All along the same remark—"We are all coming back as we like the Belgian side best."

On leaving Mahagi, on Lake Albert, we climbed the steep escarpment to begin our journey across the 140 mile stretch to Irumu. It was bitterly cold after the hot Nile watershed, but a more glorious and splendid bit of country I have not seen in Africa. Teeming with a population of a most friendly and hospitable nature, well stocked with cattle and goats, rich in vegetables and bananas, and well supplied with milk and eggs, it seemed a perfect paradise.

Pygmies dancing.

Reaching Irumu, quite a new post, we found our hosts, Lieutenant Demuenyuck and Lieutenant Siffer, most charming, and it was entirely owing to their help and advice that our expedition turned out so successfully. While resting here a day we heard of an old native chief who had living with him a a young pygmy boy of 18, called Mongongu, who could also talk Swahili. By the aid of numerous presents we induced the old man to let the boy accompany us, giving him blankets and clothes, with promises of more if he could induce others to visit England with us. This little fellow became a great favourite with all our party, and was quite happy when on or near the donkeys. He formed a quaint picture, clad in his bright red blanket, with one of my old terai hats on, stepping out leading our caravan.

A few marches soon brought us to the edge of the much-

A Pygmy Village.

talked-of pygmy forest, and pushing along under very depressing circumstances, having run into a terrific thunderstorm, we finally reached the Ituri river. By means of the only rotten old peroke on the stream, we at last got across, and formed our first camp in pygmy-land.

We were pleased to hear that our envoys had been successful in persuading some of the little folk to come in and give us a dance.

The coming of the big white sahibs, loaded with presents, who only wanted to make friends with the pygmies, and see them dance, and get them to hunt, had evidently been well exploited. After a hasty meal about 35 visitors, chiefly men, came in to our encampment—a weird-looking crowd, naked except for a small bit of deer-skin worn by the men, and two

Pygmies dancing.

bunches of leaves by the women. After an hour's hard thumping on a small drum by an aged warrior, accompanied by an unceasing dance by the rest of the visitors, we called a halt, and having bestowed endless cloth, salt and beads on each one, begged them to come next morning and take us hunting.

Alas! for our hopes. When daylight appeared it was found that every pygmy had made a clean bolt into the dense forest. There was nothing for it but to push on; so taking possession of the old peroke, we embarked two of the donkeys and our own boys, and slowly drifted down stream, while our porters marched alongside on the bank. Towards evening we turned up a small stream, and finding it too shallow for our heavily-loaded boat, we made for a big high-standing rock, which seemed the only clear place for landing in all the dense under-growth. Two boys

Pygmy dancers with two Walesse women.

had swarmed up the rock and just dragged me up, when without a moment's warning they rushed into the jungle, throwing their arms wildly about and yelling like madmen. I quickly followed suit, finding myself stung all over. Plunging into the thickest bush, I at last got clear. It happened we had landed right on top of a flying-ant's nest, with results disastrous to ourselves. The others down below had to rush into the water and lie down, while the poor donkeys simply went mad and jumped overboard.

Our next camp in pygmy-land was a repetition of our first, our visitors danced, accepted presents, made many promises, and then made a bolt of it at night. I began to get a little discouraged, but kept pushing on further into the forest, sometimes finding a bit of good going, at others a mere game trail. During the day one hardly required to wear a cap,

Pygmies dancing.

the sun's rays not penetrating through the thick foliage. We were terribly bothered by swarms of a peculiar sort of horse-fly, which bites through any clothes, and which pestered our donkeys almost to death.

The most extraordinary stillness pervaded the whole place; except for an occasional band of monkeys or the harsh screaming of the horn-bills there was never a sound.

It was a pleasant surprise to us to find no ants, for last year in the big forest every leaf was covered with them, and one was bitten every second. Some of the timber is very fine, chiefly the false cotton tree, the trunks of which assume all shapes. Still more quaint are their huge, flat roots. Not more than three or four inches thick, they grow quite flat, often three feet from the ground, and run in all directions from the trunk,

Pygmies dancing.

looking like so many stalls in a stable. Placing a sheet over two makes a nice cool resting place.

Having reached a small stream of running water we decided to camp awhile and again try our luck among the pygmy villages scattered around.

Here our fortune was to change, as after being looked at by a small band of men who came and danced, they kept their word, and arrived next morning to hunt. Having once won their confidence they willingly took us to see their different villages, hidden away in almost inaccessible places. Following my usual custom, I hardly ever carried a rifle with me, and very

Pygmies dancing.

seldom even a shot-gun, though I found the shooting of a flying bird caused them much pleasure. I think the mere fact of wandering about with them, carrying only a camera and umbrella or walking stick, was the cause of their becoming so friendly. Even the women took to visiting our camp alone, when they wanted a little variety or some small present.

The primitive shelters—one can hardly call them villages—inhabited by the pygmies are formed of ten to twelve leafed-in arbours, about seven feet in diameter and four feet high, constructed by sticking in the ground some twenty supple, thin branches, bending them over, and then fastening them together at the centre; these they encircle with long creepers, and then cover all in with big plantain leaves.

Each hut is usually inhabited by about eight or nine people, who all obey their appointed chief, whose principal duty is to

Pygmies dancing.

settle disputes, and (the pygmies being entirely a nomad race) the frequent question of when and where to move camp. A few cooking pots made out of clay, and gourds for water, are their sole household effects. I expected to find them quite devoid of dress, but now all the men wear a bit of tanned skin, suspended by a single cord round the waist, ornamented by one big glass bead, while the women renew their cheap costume daily by simply gathering two bunches of green leaves. The hair of all grows exceedingly short and curly, still they manage to spend much time in its laying out and treatment. To cut patterns all over the head seems the principal style; but some will shave half the head entirely; others cut narrow lanes through the hair; while many twist it up in two or three peaks, into which they plait the hair of squirrels, or feathers.

Trekking through the forest.

The Pygmies

Taking the pygmies we saw, I do not ever remember seeing such a wonderful variety, so many types and such extremes. The general height seemed to run from 3ft. 10 in. to 4 ft. 5 in. While some would be fairly fat, the greater part would be mere skeletons; the women, as usual with all native races, being always more robust than the men. Their complexions vary from very black to a horribly sickly yellow. Flat noses and thick lips covering half their faces would appear in the same family along with really good features. Copper and brass wire is much prized for the making of ornaments, different coloured beads, large and small, also cowrie shells, being likewise in great favour. For the making of weapons they collect the ironstone, and digging a hole in the ground for the fire, smelt it down by the aid of a primitive set of bellows made of roughly-tanned skin, tied to a hollow bamboo cane, which is inserted under the fire. They make spears, knives and arrows, the latter of many types and well made, considering the fact that they use nothing but different shaped stones for tools in their making. Their length of life is very short, the man seldom seeing 40 or the woman 35 years. Considering the conditions of life it is not to be wondered at. During eight months of the year the forest is a swamp, rain falling daily. Food then is very hard to procure, and they live on anything they can pick up, dead rats, mice and frogs, all helping to stave off hunger. Smallpox is a terrible scourge, and all alike seem to suffer from a hard, racking cough. Truly they have a miserable time of it, and it is astonishing how they have survived all these generations. Each day enlarged our circle of friends, and even the inhabitants of the first villages finally all came in and built huts, so as to hunt with us.

And now I will describe a day's hunting. At daybreak, while the fog is still enveloping everything, shrill whistles begin to sound from all sides, and as the hunters draw near one catches snatches of songs. Soon they begin to muster in front of our tents—a motley crowd of about 140 men and boys—some armed with spears, some with bows and arrows, while a few lead mongrel dogs with an iron bell attached to their necks. Having tried to explain that we do not want to kill anything but the okapi, and that its skin must not be cut about and gashed with spears, we sally forth in single file for about ten miles. The whole party then extends in a long line, we in the centre, and proceeds to drive the whole country ahead. Darting about in the thick bush our friends look like so many little imps. Their plan of hunting is this: the moment game is started the man just behind blows his whistle, when immediately the men on each side dart forward in a horseshoe and try to encircle the animal before it can get away; they then rush in and spear it. Several times did we nearly kill ourselves in madly trying to be in at the death, only to find they had stuck some miserable pig or tiny dik-dik. Of course, after this there was no chance of an okapi within miles. The pygmies

Pygmies as found in the Forest.

are anyway a plucky lot—quite young boys rushing boldly in and sticking a huge old boar, while the men will run right under an elephant or buffalo and drive a spear in from underneath; they then follow on its trail for hours till the poison takes effect. As soon as the animal dies they cut out a large piece of flesh all round the poisoned wound, so that the rest is not affected. They assured us they hardly ever use poisoned arrows, only spears, not putting the poison on the blade but on the wood handle above. It only required one day's hunting to know that it was an absolute impossibility for any white man to shoot an okapi. If my best friend were to tell me he had shot one, I fear I should not believe him. I heard of an Italian who had shot one the previous year. On enquiry we found that his okapi had been killed in a similar manner to the two whose skins we brought away. Unfortunately, unless right on the spot, the animal is in a very short time cut up and quite spoilt. Had we been able to spend another month I feel sure we could have got a whole good skin, skeleton and photographs, but only by sitting down and waiting till the little people had killed one, and then packing off to the place without delay. Each night on returning to camp the spoils would be laid out, and having taken the heads or skins of any animals wanted, the rest would be carried off in triumph, of course accompanied by many gifts.

After two successful days' hunt, which meant plenty of meat, they would say they were tired, so we had to fall back on a visit to their villages and a big dance in the afternoon. These dances are really exceedingly well done, far better than any executed by the ordinary natives. Having swept and cleared an open space of all stones, two elderly veterans squat down with a drum between their knees. The only other music worn or carried is by those dancing, and consists of pieces of bamboo cane a foot long, split half-way down into numberless small strips, two of these when hit together making a clicking, rattling sound. Some of the men wear on their ankles two pieces of hollowed iron tied together, with a stone inside, every time they stamp their feet making them jingle. A similar sort of thing is carried by the women, only with a handle, and used like a rattle.

Every lot of dancers always has a dancing master who takes the lead; he begins, and gradually every one has fallen into line; moving in and out, twisting and turning like a snake, every moment they become more and more like mad people. Twisting their bodies into all sorts of shapes, they go through the most extraordinary contortions, taking all manner of steps, waving their arms, singing wild snatches of choruses, and making most hideous grimaces, yet every movement is executed in most perfect time, even down to the smallest children, who have by this time all joined in. We were

Pygmies at Home.

obliged to let them go on for some time so as not to hurt their feelings, then calling a halt, the usual distribution of presents took place. The whole crowd would rush away, to return again with a couple of plantain leaves, into one of which they took the beads, and the other the salt and sugar—for we could never induce them to keep them separate. Now that we had got on such excellent terms, we told Mongongu to begin his power of persuasion. Two chiefs' daughters I particularly wanted to get, and wasted many extra gifts on, but after much hesitation the old father at last said, "No."

Though the pygmies die young they start life early, generally marrying at eight or nine. The men buy their wives with three or four spears and ten to fifteen arrows, according to the market value of the lady. These they pay by instalments, the courtship beginning by the suitor presenting the father with a spear, and if accepted he comes along again as soon as ever he can raise another, but not till the last arrow is handed over is he allowed to take his bride; thus the father always has something in hand, should the suitor change his mind, with which to sooth the sorrowing lady of possibly seven or eight years of age. A man can have as many wives as he can afford to buy.

When a boy is born there are great rejoicings, but if an unlucky girl appears, out goes the father to gather a lot of plantain leaves with which he lashes the newly-arrived member of the family from head to foot.

It has been stated that the pygmies live in the trees, but all flatly contradicted it, and said they only hid there after they had committed some raid, and wanted to lie low till all danger had passed. One or two said they believed a tribe of Mambutti living round Nepoko did construct shelters in tree-tops.

They make three distinct kinds of poison—"Govu-govu," from a leaf like our common docking; "Arbi," from a shrub having a leaf like our common beech tree; and "Appowi," made from a plant just like our common nettle.

A peculiar superstition to bring a hunter good luck is for a man, the night before they start out, to cut three slits on the back of his hand, into which he rubs a mixture of herbs, causing intense irritation. Should a person die suddenly without previously being sick, some kind neighbour says it is the devil, called by them "Oudah." The next-of-kin at once cuts the body clean in two, and shows to any doubting ones that it was the devil who killed; but should they discover death to have been caused by some unforeseen complaint, then the man who first spread the rumour about Oudah has to pay a heavy fine of spears and arrows to the dead person's relatives. Murder is quickly punished by the next-of-kin lying in wait for the culprit and killing him.

Two okapi skins from the Ituri Forest.

The Pygmies

The pygmies never steal from one another, but delight in raiding caravans or plundering a native village on the outskirts of the forest. While we were hunting with them a party of these very people killed seventeen porters, and putting to flight the native soldiers, who are never allowed to carry rifles unless under the command of a white officer, they looted the whole caravan.

They have no canoes, but do any fishing from the banks. They make a curious net of fine creepers, which is interlaced with poles driven well out into the water. When hunting and they kill an extra big animal, and the chief is not with them, they do not touch it till his arrival, when he decides whether to move the animal to the village or the village to the animal. A chorus they are very fond of singing, when translated, runs: "If we make a village here it is good. If we make it in another place it is just as good;" but when not dancing they are the most silent people possible, sitting for hours round their fires hardly speaking. As far as we could ascertain these people have no religion at all, having nothing which they worship or hold in reverence in any way.

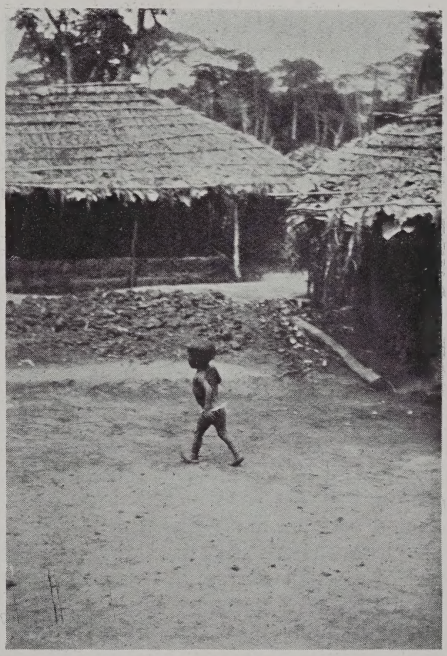
The pygmies are apparently blessed with extraordinary good and strong teeth, no bone being too big or too hard to be crunched up and devoured. Another funny habit is instead of skinning an animal when killed, they merely cut it up into chunks with skin and hair attached, this all goes into the pot and, when cooked, eaten.

They are fond of smoking, but about two puffs at a time, followed by a violent fit of coughing, is all they indulge in at a time. A three-foot length of bamboo cane is used as a pipe, with charcoal and smouldering leaves in place of tobacco. The pygmies always bury their dead in graves, not like some tribes, the powerful Azandi, for instance, who, if a child dies, bury it close to their hut door; when a grown-up person dies they bury him in the centre of the village, but when an old person departs this life they just fling the body into the neighbouring bush for the hyæna to eat and clear away. It is certainly wonderful how these people have survived all these generations, living under such depressing conditions. Written about in Homer's "Iliad"—figuring in Roman and Egyptian processional triumphs, they are entirely lost sight of until the expedition of Stanley 16 years ago. Talking of him I had a very interesting talk with Ruberingha, one of his old guides, and we picked up a flag originally taken from Stanley's Expedition.

A few pygmies quite on the outskirts of the forest have so intermixed with the Walesse native as to be quite uninteresting and to have lost all originality; they, however, serve the purpose of acting as a go-between for the exchange of meat for sweet potatoes, salt and beads.

During our stay I got three kinds of pig and several antelope, mostly new to me.

Knowing the rains were due we struck camp and retraced our steps after many farewell dances. Our party now consisted of Chief Bokane, aged 35, Matuka, aged 23, Mafutiminga (or the fat boy), aged 22, Mongongu, aged 18, an ugly old lady of 31 called Amuriape, and a good-looklng lady of 22, by name Kuarke, called by us the princess. We luckily procured a collection of old soldiers' hats and a variety of clothing for them as we passed Irumu. The return journey to the Nile was exceedingly trying, as I gave up all the donkeys, besides hammocks, for carrying our friends. As we had to lift them off and on nearly every quarter of a mile it was most tiring, but we dare not risk them riding over rotten bridges, or going up and down inclines. Besides this the women were always going off to sleep, and had several tumbles in consequence. We had to be most careful to travel them as much as possible out of the sun, for this knocks them over at once. I must say they were very plucky, and, though often very tired, when interrogated would answer, "Yes, we are tired, but Master is kind to us, and we will go on to the next village." My servant, Ahmed, was most kind to them, for, though ill himself, I could never persuade him to ride a bit and make a pygmy walk. Our little boy was a great jockey, and quite looked upon the biggest donkey (my own particular one) as his own mount. Further down the Nile we used an iron boat four days, and had to leave all the animals behind at Wadelai except one. Having two days' march before us, the one donkey carried the women, two at a time. When Mongongu saw both the women put on his mount and was told that he was to walk he got awfully cross, when suddenly a bright thought struck him that no one was sitting on its neck, so he asked to be placed there.



Pygmy boy.

The Pygmies

We were very lucky in reaching Khartoum safely, without any of the pygmies being at all sick, except the old woman, who was suffering from complications caused by an old healed-up wound in the back and knee, caused by a poisoned spear in a tribal fight. Everyone was most kind to them all the way down, and my great fear was their being killed by kindness, their one idea of perfect bliss being to eat and sleep, while their bugbear was to exercise and wash. I see already some people in utter ignorance of their forest life are writing on the atrocious crime of dragging these people over here. They do not think of how much good it may do when these same people return, and round the camp fires tell over and over again the wonders and kindness of the white masters. Instead of dragging out a mere existence during the nine months rainy season, half starved and attacked by all sorts of diseases, my little friends are having the time of their life, good food, clothes, and the best of medical advice, visiting a country whose climate I believe will suit them splendidly—already each nearly a stone heavier; I fear their little hearts will be sad when the time comes to go home. Another year I have no doubt half the inhabitants of the Ituri forest will clamour to come.

And now I must draw this little book to a close, having done my best to describe a few of the habits and customs of the pygmies as far as we were able to ascertain them, through one, and often two, interpreters. After my wanderings, covering thousands of miles, I often wonder if it is possible that only 16 years ago Stanley fought his way inch by inch through all this country, inhabited by hundreds of tribes, mostly cannibals, and always fighting each other, devastated from end to end by that most awful curse, the slave trader. I say again, I can hardly imagine that this wonderful country has been settled and opened up by a mere handful of white men so that a man can travel anywhere unarmed with greater safety than in any other part of British Africa, or even the streets of London. If only some of these people who write so much against the Congo would go and see for themselves, they would find out how much good work has been done, and would not blame the hundreds of splendid hard-working officers who are making a country, which in a few years will be far ahead of anything we possess. Luckily, every month sees more visitors going to the Congo, who all return impressed with the excellent work done. My advice to all is "Go and see for yourself."